

26 November 2007

Mrs Susan Richardson
Director of Children and Young People's Services
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
The Rivington Centre
Rivington Road
St Helens
WA10 4ND

Dear Mrs Richardson

2007 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN ST HELENS METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

This letter summarises the findings of the 2007 annual performance assessment (APA) for your local authority. The judgements in the letter draw on your review of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) where it was available, and the evidence and briefings provided by Ofsted, other inspectorates and relevant bodies. We are grateful for the information you provided to support this process and for the time given by you and your colleagues during the assessment.

Overall effectiveness of children's services Grade 3

St Helens Council consistently delivers services for children and young people well. The council has evaluated its provision effectively and has suitably prioritised the actions in the review of its CYPP. There has been significant progress made since last year on a number of fronts and the council is making strong contributions to the lives of children and young people within a locality of significant social disadvantage.

Being healthy Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this area is good. Healthy lifestyles are well promoted through a strong well-managed Healthy Schools and sports programme with effective multi-agency partnerships in place. The council has been awarded 'Beacon Council Status' for Healthy Schools. There is an obesity screening process in place for all reception age children and the Nursing Times has awarded St Helens an obesity award for the nurse led clinic working with obese children.

Reducing the rates of infant mortality is a strategic priority for the council and there is good targeted multi-agency work taking place to improve levels of breast-feeding

and to reduce smoking during pregnancy. The La Leche peer group and Get Closer campaign are two good examples of work taking place. However, despite this, there has been a small reduction in breast-feeding rates and the challenging target for reducing smoking during pregnancy has not been met. There has been good progress in reducing the rates of teenage pregnancies, with a 15.2% overall reduction from the baseline set in 1998 and the gap is closing with the national average which reduced by 12.0%. There has been an increase in numbers of teenage mothers who are in education, employment and training against a corresponding decrease of numbers not in education, employment and training from 10.1% in August 2006 to 6.8% in August 2007.

The health needs of looked after children and young people continue to be met effectively with good sustained performance that remains higher than statistical neighbours and national averages. Good progress has been made towards the implementation of a comprehensive Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service and the numbers of young people who commit offences that require mental health services receive timely interventions.

Areas for development

- Set targets for the reduction of obesity.
- Reduce infant mortality rates, and meet targets for reduction of smoking during pregnancy and increased rates of initiation of breast-feeding for new mothers.

Staying safe

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes in this aspect is good. As a result of a relentless focus on child protection within social work teams, there has been a notable increase in the number of initial and core assessments completed within timescales. Initial assessments completed within seven days have increased from 62.5% in 2005-06 to 74.6% in 2006-07 and now exceed national averages. Core assessments have increased from 60% in 2005-06 to 86% in 2006-07, similarly exceeding national averages. The Local Safeguarding Children Board appointed a consultant to work alongside a short-life group specifically set up to consider the reason for rising numbers on the register and to review threshold criteria. The criteria have been reviewed and changed to reflect feedback and there has been a significant decrease in numbers of children and young people on the register. The Local Safeguarding Children Board along with the Director of Children's Services, continue to closely monitor performance in this area and provide appropriate challenge and support.

Increases in numbers of looked after children and young people was highlighted as an area for improvement in the 2006 APA and this issue remains a concern as

numbers have risen from 295 in March 2006 to 319 in March 2007. Almost all looked after children and young people have a named qualified social worker and 98% of cases were reviewed within timescales. A very successful campaign has resulted in an increase of foster carers and fewer looked after children and young people are now placed in residential care. Placement stability is now good and the numbers of children and young people placed for adoption have increased. The recent implementation of the Family Support and Parenting Strategy is intended to further support the work to reduce numbers of looked after children and young people. Some 90% of young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities aged 14–18 have a transition plan in place for managing the move to adult services; this is lower than national averages. The numbers and quality of transition plans are currently under review for targeted improvements.

Good progress is being made with roll out and implementation of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), with a comprehensive multi-agency training programme having been undertaken. To date 200 CAF assessments have been logged on to the database managed by the Child in Need Co-ordinator. The Information Sharing and Assessment (ISA) pilot has been evaluated and is recognised as good practice. The Council has recently awarded a contract for the implementation of a Borough wide integrated children's system, which will build on the successful work undertaken during the ISA pilot.

Areas for development

- Reduce numbers of looked after children and young people.
- Ensure quality of transition planning for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

Enjoying and achieving

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. Overall, early years Foundation Stage provision ensures that children make good progress and are prepared well for formal schooling. The percentage of schools with early years provision judged as outstanding is twice that of comparable authorities. However, the quality of early years child care provision is not as good and the council recognises the need to increase the proportion of child care settings judged as good through inspection.

Children at Key Stages 1 and 2 generally perform above comparator groups despite a 1% dip in the 2006 Key Stage 2 English results. Nevertheless the average points score in English was above comparator groups and national figures, reflecting an improvement in Level 5 results in 2006. At Key Stage 3 the rate of improvement continues with notable improvements in English. The value added score from Key

Stages 2 to 3 was still below the national average but showed some improvement in 2006.

GCSE results for young people achieving at least 5 A* to C grades continued to improve on the previous year. When English and mathematics are included and comparisons made for young people achieving at least 1 A* to G grade at GCSE, results appear less strong and are below comparable councils. However, unvalidated results for 2007 indicate that substantial improvement has been made in the number of children and young people achieving at least 5 A* to C GCSE grades both with and without English and mathematics included. The rate of progress made by children and young people from Key Stages 2 to 4 improved by 2.1 percentage points; a notable achievement, but remains below national averages. No schools failed to achieve their 25% floor target. In 2007 the local authority revised its strategy for support and intervention following extensive consultation. A cross-council group effectively coordinates and monitors this work. Successes are notable including examples of secondary schools that have significantly increased their GCSE results from 2006 to 2007, in part, as a result of challenge and support which has been judiciously focused on middle management.

Very few schools have been judged to cause concern. The council has effective systems for identifying poorly performing schools and provides robust support and challenge to them; the one primary school in special measures came out of the category in one year.

Attendance in primary and secondary schools is close to that found in similar areas and nationally. Unauthorised absence has been identified as a problem by the council and features as a priority in the CYPP. Inroads are being made in raising the attendance of looked after children and young people. However, absence from school is still too high even though there are relatively small numbers in this group. Behaviour support is good and inspection judgements bear this out. There have been no permanent exclusions. Fixed-term exclusions in secondary and special schools are below comparators although in primary schools they are a little above. The percentage of surplus places is low.

There is a rigorous approach to improving provision for looked after children and young people. A higher proportion take GCSE than in similar authorities and more leave care at 16 with at least 1 GCSE at grade A* to G. However, data for 2005/06 shows fewer leave care with 5 or more GCSEs at grade A* to C compared to similar areas and national averages. Unvalidated data for 2007 provided by the council indicates a significant closing of the gap between GCSE results for looked after young people and for other children in St Helens. The Family Support and Parenting Strategy is intended to further support looked after children and young people.

There is a reducing number of children and young people with a statement of special educational needs and the council has fewer statements than comparator groups. The timeliness of local authority statementing is good. There have been improved integrated planning arrangements for children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. These are robust and early indications are that they are having an impact, for example, there are fewer referrals for support. However, the authority has not yet evaluated its impact by comparing the progress and attainment of children and young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in comparison to the interventions they have received.

Areas for development

- Focus support and challenge on early years child care settings to increase the proportion of good inspection judgements.
- Continue to reduce the level of absence of looked after children and young people.

Making a positive contribution

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. There is strong consultation, engagement and participation of children and young people in some aspects of decision making and the implementation of the new strategy will strengthen this area. There is clear evidence that children and young people are making a key contribution to informing service delivery and design.

Children's centres and extended school activities, including activities supported by the voluntary and community sector, enable children and young people, particularly the vulnerable, to access services. There has been a discernable increase in numbers of young people working toward the Duke of Edinburgh award, particularly, those who have a learning difficulty and/or disability. There is a young carers group and a carers' strategy encompassing both children and adult carers, but the standards have not been reviewed for some time and actions and timescales relate to 2003. In addition, the council website, which has a link for young carers, does not provide clear information for parents and carers who might need to access this service.

The youth offending team is a strength, and there have been significant reductions in the rates of young people who re-offend. However, there has been a 15.2% increase in the rates of first time entrants to the youth justice system against a target reduction of 5%. Whilst this can be related to the neighbourhood policing policy of reducing low level crimes, it remains a concern due to the high levels of young people entering the youth justice system. There has been a reduction in the number of looked after children and young people subject to a reprimand, final

warning or conviction and a high proportion of these children and young people contribute their views to statutory reviews.

Areas for development

- Work with the police service to reduce numbers of first time entrants into the youth justice system.
- Update the strategy, standards and information on the website for young carers.

Achieving economic well-being

Grade 3

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The contribution of services to improving outcomes for children and young people in this aspect is good. The development of the 14–19 strategy has stepped up a pace and there is full engagement of partners. An implementation plan for the single partnership has effectively capitalised on the work of three previous clusters of schools and funding has been approved for the development of a vocational learning centre. There is a robust plan to increase Level 2 qualifications. The percentage of young people achieving Level 2 qualifications by age 19 increased by a half point to 64.5% in 2006 and was close to those of similar councils. The percentage of young people with Level 3 qualifications has increased year on year and is above that found in similar councils. Unvalidated GCSE results for 2007 indicate further steps forward. The Level 2 provision has been broadened and increased in part through an additional 140 construction placements. Carmel Sixth Form College holds Beacon status and was graded as outstanding at its recent inspection.

The reduction of the number of young people not in education, employment and training is prominent in the council's CYPP and partnership work. A multi-agency task force is having success in reducing the figures although its impact was initially slow. The percentage of 16–18 year olds not in education, employment and training is 10%. This has reduced from the previous year and is marginally below similar councils. The percentage of 19-year-olds not in education, employment and training is 11%. This has increased from the previous year and is above comparator groups. Monthly figures, provided by the council, show the number of young people not in education, employment and training is reducing but sluggishly. The council reports that there has been some success in reducing the numbers of teenage mothers and care leavers not in education, employment and training with the latter group reducing from 50% in 2006 to 25% in 2007. Year 11 students 'not known' to the council are the lowest in Greater Merseyside and well below the national average. More young people at Year 11 continue learning than in similar councils and nationally.

At 13.8% and 14.5% respectively the gap is narrowing between the council and national averages for the proportion of work based learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The council is a strong advocate for looked after children and young people. There is cross-council recognition of the importance given to this group and a strategy and increased funding to implement this is in place. It rigorously tracks outcomes for looked after children and young people and other vulnerable groups. The ratio of looked after children and young people who are in employment, education and training at age 19 compared to all children and young people is better than comparator groups. The council's corporate parenting responsibility is tangible and of the 35 modern apprenticeships given by the council in 2006-07 20% were to care leavers. The percentage of care leavers living in suitable accommodation is above comparator councils and nationally.

Area for development

- Reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training.

Capacity to improve, including the management of children's services

Grade 4

Summary of strengths and areas for development

The council has outstanding capacity to improve its services for children and young people. Its management arrangements are robust and there is good leadership and strong corporate support for improving provision further. The review of the 2006 CYPP was thorough and self critical where necessary. The rationale for the identification and adjustment of priorities in the review of the CYPP is clear and convincing and based on consultation and needs-analysis. It showed that good progress is being made in many areas. Progress in a few areas identified in the last APA has been less notable; as such, they remain areas for development. Partnership work is strong and much multi-agency work is evident at all levels. There is a joint commissioning group and the principles and framework of the commissioning strategy have been established. Wider commissioning is exemplified in the joint emergency duty team established with Halton Borough Council. The Council has in place a comprehensive performance management framework, supported by an extensive on-line monitoring database and all partners have inputting and access rights to the database.

Consultation, not least with children and young people, is extensive and an established feature of the work of children's services.

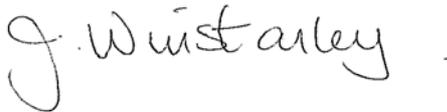
The council has a clear budget strategy to resource its initiatives and the management of financial resources is sound.

Area for development

- Continue to address outstanding issues from the 2006 APA.

The children's services grade is the performance rating for the purpose of section 138 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. It will also provide the score for the children and young people service block in the comprehensive performance assessment to be published by the Audit Commission.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Juliet Winstanley".

Juliet Winstanley
Divisional Manager
Local Services Inspection